

Tackling Gender Inequality in STEM? Consider Culture, A New Study Says

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Growing up in Saudi Arabia, Aciel Eshky didn't get the memo that science was for boys. When she was around ten years old, her aunt started to teach her basic computer programming. From there, going on to a degree in computer science seemed like a natural fit. So when a classmate in her master's program abroad told her that women were weaker than men at math, it came as a shock. "I was really annoyed," Eshky says. "I felt like I was being bullied."

Despite its dismal reputation for gender equality, Saudi Arabia has a surprising level of female graduates in the so-called STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Ranked among the bottom 20 countries in the World Economic Forum's [Global Gender Gap Index](#) in 2015, women nonetheless made up 39% of graduates in a cluster of "core" STEM subjects. This number is higher than Iceland's 35%, even though the Nordic country ranks number one for gender equality. Norway, which has the second-highest level of gender equity, sees only 26% of women graduating with STEM degrees.

Taken together with these numbers, Eshky's experience is illustrative of the so-called "gender-equality paradox" reported in a [recent headline-grabbing paper](#): Countries ranking higher on measures of gender equality, the study found, tend to have fewer women pursuing a STEM education than those further down the gender equality ranks.

Researchers have been reporting paradoxical results like these for years, sparking debate over the best [explanation](#) for the [counterintuitive findings](#). For the numerous organisations dedicated to tackling the problem of women's under-representation in science, the answers could have implications for developing appropriate interventions, and ultimately determining the path to gender equity in countries of vastly different cultural backgrounds.